REPORT OCT 3, 2018

The Origins of Russia's Broad Political Assault on the United States

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The Russian attack on U.S. democracy began in 2014 and is more wide-ranging and coordinated than previously understood. How the United States responds requires a strategy that both applies pressure on Russia via additional sanctions and improves the United States' defensive capabilities against further Russian interference.

The Kremlin and Saint Basil's Cathedral on the Red Square in Moscow by night. (Getty/Michel Setboun)

Introduction and summary

On January 6, 2017, the U.S. intelligence community released a declassified assessment to the public confirming what most had already suspected: Russian President Vladimir Putin had ordered an influence campaign in 2016 aimed at the U.S. presidential election.[1] Since the intelligence community released its assessment, the public has learned a great deal about this assault from the special counsel investigation, press reporting, and declassified intelligence. Based on analysis of available material, it has become increasingly clear when, how, and why Russia launched the campaign against American democracy. It is evident that there was a surge of activity intended to influence the American electorate and political institutions that originated in 2014 as a counterresponse to the U.S.-led international isolation of Russia following its intervention in Ukraine.

To be clear, Russia's use of political weaponry against the United States extends further back than just 2014. In fact, a 1981 U.S. State Department Special Report defined Soviet active measures as "operations intended to affect other nations' policies, as distinct from espionage and counterintelligence," but not including the legitimate tools of public diplomacy.[2] The 1981 report highlights many of the same instruments that Russia uses today, including disinformation, controlling foreign media, deploying front groups, using blackmail, and engaging in political-influence operations.[3]

Despite Russia's history of interference, however, it is apparent that in 2014, Russia launched a distinct and multifaceted campaign to undermine and

influence the American democratic process. The goals of this campaign are clear:

- To sow political and social discord in the United States;
- To undermine and challenge the American and Western democratic system as a model to emulate for transitioning democracies; and
- To foster ties and support among powerful voices within the party that Russian hawks have traditionally dominated, with the aim to soften that party's stance.

This campaign, which is still ongoing, consists of five mutually reinforcing lines of effort (LOE):

LOE 1: The deployment of information warfare;

LOE 2: The use of cyberoperations;

LOE 3: The courting of influential voices within the American conservative movement;

LOE 4: The support for extreme and destabilizing political movements; and

LOE 5: The direct targeting of voters.

When examining these separate lines of influence, a clear pattern emerges: All five LOEs either commenced or accelerated in 2014 and early 2015. That all of these LOEs began at about the same time suggests that there was a moment following the Ukraine crisis when a specific decision was made to deploy a far-reaching campaign across multiple fronts. Taken as a whole, this reveals a much broader—and more coordinated—effort than has previously been understood.

Background and context: The importance of 2014

When President Barack Obama came into office in 2009, U.S.-Russia relations had reached what was then considered their post-Cold War nadir. After a series of disagreements—over issues including NATO expansion, the Bush administration's missile defense program, support for democratic colour revolutions in former Soviet states, and the Iraq War—the relationship reached a new low when Russia invaded its neighbor, Georgia.[4] This prompted a strong U.S.-led international condemnation. Much like his predecessor, former President George W. Bush, President Obama originally saw Russia as an important partner on key global issues and pursued a policy of detente known as the Russia reset.[5] This coincided with Putin stepping down from the presidency for one term to serve as prime minister, obliging, only in a very technical sense, to constitutional term limits.[6] There were significant achievements gained under the reset, including the New START treaty, international sanctions against Iran, the opening of the Northern Distribution Network supply line into Afghanistan, and cooperation on counterterrorism and law enforcement. In 2011, however, U.S.-Russia relations began to sour.

That fall, then-Prime Minister Putin announced that he would seek a return to the presidency, standing as a candidate in the March 2012 presidential election. While he had remained the center of power in Moscow as prime minster, Putin's announcement that he would return as president angered many young, urban, middle-class voters, who felt that this deprived them of a real choice at the ballot box.[7] Then, in December 2011, Russia held parliamentary elections where Putin's United Russia party performed poorly but still won. Election observers soon brought to light widespread irregularities, which spread quickly due to the recent proliferation of social media and smartphones. This quickly led to popular protests across Russia. The demonstrations grew, reaching hundreds of thousands of people and making them the largest protests of their kind since 1991 and the collapse of the Soviet Union.[8]

These demonstrations coincided with the Arab Spring, when popular protests throughout the Middle East toppled one dictator after another. The unrest frightened Putin, who was shocked by how quickly political and military elites abandoned leaders such as Egypt's former President Hosni Mubarak, and particularly shaken by the death of former Libyan strongman Muammar Qadhafi at the hands of his own people.[9] Putin viewed the protests throughout Russia as a rehearsal for a similar uprising at home, and he was convinced that America was behind the unrest.[10] Putin labeled the Russian protesters as agents of American influence, seeking to discredit them and building off his long-held belief that the United States was behind the colour revolutions in Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, and Ukraine during the previous decade. Now, he believed, it was

happening in Russia.[11] Specifically, he blamed then-U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who had criticized the parliamentary vote and who Putin believed was personally behind the protests, claiming they were a State Department-backed effort and that Secretary Clinton's critical remarks were a signal to the protesters for their "active work" to begin.[12]

As relations with Russia broke down upon Putin's return to the presidency and the ensuing crackdown on opposition after the 2011 protests, the U.S. government—both the Obama administration and Congress—began to pressure Russia on its human-rights abuses and aggressive foreign policy. In 2012, Congress passed the Magnitsky Act, which imposed sanctions on individuals involved in the detention, abuse, and death of Russian lawyer and auditor Sergei Magnitsky as well as others whom the United States considers "responsible for extrajudicial killings, torture, or other human rights violations committed against individuals seeking to promote human rights or to expose illegal activity carried out by officials of the government of the Russian Federation."[13] At its core, the Magnitsky Act targets powerful Russian officials by freezing their assets and restricting their entry into the United States.

The Russian elite was furious about this move. Many of Russia's rich and powerful have their families and fortunes parked in Western cities to take advantage of the lifestyle as well as to protect their fortunes.[14] These new measures put in place the first major roadblock for the Russian elite to travel to the West and gain access to the American financial infrastructure. The Magnitsky Act exposed a vulnerability and, after its passage, these powerful and wealthy Russians, on whose support Putin depends, became worried about Western authorities freezing their funds.[15]

Putin's response was asymmetric, nonsensical, and unusually cruel.[16] A proportional economic response was out of the question because retaliatory sanctions from Russia would do little to impact U.S. interests and would much more likely harm Russia's economy. So instead, Putin responded by suspending American adoptions of Russian orphans, many of whom were sick or disabled.[17] In doing so, Putin tapped into post-reset anti-American sentiment by holding up a handful of cases in which Russian adoptees died after being taken in by American families and insisting that Russia needed no help when it came to taking care of its own.[18] Russia also increasingly harassed American diplomats serving in Moscow, most notably then-U.S. Ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul.[19]

The key final trigger, however, was the Euromaidan Revolution that gripped Ukraine in the winter of 2013-14. Beginning in late November 2013, demonstrators took to Independence Square, also known as Maidan Nezalezhnosti, after the government of pro-Russia President of Ukraine Viktor Yanukovych decided to suspend the signing of an association agreement between Ukraine and the European Union, opting for closer ties to Russia instead. However, the people of Ukraine wanted a future associated with Europe and the liberal democratic values that accompany that opportunity. Because the protests concerned whether Ukraine's future lay with the West or with Russia, it quickly became a geopolitical tug of war that Putin conspiratorially believed the United States was instigating.[20]

Putin views the European Union as a strategic threat because of its ability to drive liberal reforms in associated countries, pulling them away from Russia. Putin instead sought to build a Eurasian Union that would serve as an alternative shared market, and Ukraine was central to its success.[21] When the revolution succeeded, causing President Yanukovych to flee to Russia in February 2014, Moscow saw it as a genuine danger.

Russia's response shocked the world. Moscow illegally annexed Crimea and invaded the eastern Ukrainian provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk, where it supported pro-Russian separatists. This series of events alarmed the Euro-Atlantic community and marked the most blatant land grab in Europe since World War II.[22] In response, the United States, in conjunction with its European allies, implemented a new round of sanctions modeled after the Magnitsky Act.[23]

Through a series of executive orders, President Obama targeted individuals and entities responsible for the Russian annexation of Crimea; undermining Ukraine's stability and misappropriating its assets; using armed force in Ukraine; or conducting business in Russian-occupied Crimea. The United States also issued a series of sanctions targeting the Russian energy and defense sectors.[24]

Between 2014 and 2017, the United States imposed sanctions on at least 595 individuals and entities including Russian officials, Ukrainian officials, de facto Crimean officials, Donbas secessionists, and Crimea-based companies.[25]

Designated entities had their assets under U.S. jurisdiction frozen and were denied entry into the United States, and Americans were prohibited from doing business with these individuals. The European Union's sanctions were closely coordinated with the United States.[26]

Russia was further isolated diplomatically as the G-8 canceled a planned summit in Sochi and expelled Russia as a member.[27] Russia's accession to the G-8 in 1998 was a major diplomatic achievement for the Yeltsin administration, bringing the country into the fold of the exclusive club of global leaders. Now Russia was on the outside.

However, Putin's response to the isolation was uncharacteristically muted, consisting primarily of banning a handful of American officials from traveling to Russia and implementing a ban on Western food products. He did not immediately respond with further escalation, and the retaliatory tit for tat appeared over by 2015.[28] However, it is now clear that the full nature of Russia's response was nowhere near over. Russia was conducting a full-fledged campaign to influence and undermine the American political system beginning in 2014—and targeting the 2016 presidential election.

LOE 1: Information warfare

Perhaps the best-documented and understood LOE in the 2016 election was Russian bots and troll farms' use of disinformation and divisive propaganda, as outlined in remarkably detailed indictments from special counsel Robert Mueller earlier this year. When Mueller issued this round of indictments, there were two surprising discoveries: 1) the level of detail and information that Mueller was able to collect and verify about how the events unfolded; and 2) that the project appeared to have launched as far back as 2014.

As the special counsel indictment states, "Beginning as early as 2014, Defendant ORGANIZATION began operations to interfere with the U.S. political system, including the 2016 U.S. presidential election."[29] The organization named in the indictment is the now infamous Internet Research Agency (IRA), which also went by a series of other names designed to conceal its activity. Specifically, in 2014, the IRA:

Started receiving funding: The group began receiving its funding from Yevgeny Prigozhin, a Russian oligarch with close ties to the Kremlin who set up and financed the operation.[30] Prigozhin is known to be Putin's go-to oligarch for special, often unsavory, projects, such as recruiting contract soldiers to fight in Ukraine and Syria.[31]

Put together a team: Almost all of the organization's senior staff was hired in 2014, and its top five officials were all put in place over a very short period between March and April 2014.[32] This came just one month after President Obama signed the first executive order implementing Ukraine-related sanctions.[33]

Built a structure to obscure its work: The organization set up the structure it used through the 2016 U.S. presidential election and beyond, establishing a series of front companies and cutouts designed to obscure its activities.[34]

Obtained a physical office space: The group set up an office at 55 Savushkina St. in St. Petersburg, Russia, that became an operational hub for its activities to interfere in the U.S. political system.[35]

Began researching U.S. politics: The group started tracking and studying groups on American social media sites dedicated to political and social issues. Two defendants listed in the indictment even traveled to the United States in June 2014, gathering intelligence in nine different states. Another defendant traveled to Atlanta in November 2014.[36]

Developed a strategy: According to the special counsel indictment, by May 2014, the organization had developed a strategy to interfere with the 2016 U.S. presidential election, with the stated goal of "spread[ing] distrust towards the candidates and the political system in general."[37]

Opened fake social media accounts: In addition to Mueller's indictment, subsequent analysis by NPR and the German Marshall Fund's Alliance for Securing Democracy found that fake accounts posing as local news organizations were created in May 2014.[38]

This incredible series of events that occurred in a short period of time suggest that the organization was created with intent and a clear mission in mind resulting from a specific decision from the highest level of the Russian

government.

LOE 2: Cyberintrusion

The most recent round of indictments from the special counsel's office released in July detailed a complex and extensive conspiracy by elite units in the GRU—Russia's military intelligence directorate—to hack the computers of Americans involved in the 2016 presidential elections, steal documents, and stage the release of those documents.[39] The use of offensive cyberweapons is not a new strategy for Russia. The Russian government has mounted cyberattacks on foreign countries for at least a decade, targeting former Soviet bloc countries such as Estonia, Lithuania, Georgia, and Ukraine as far back as 2007.[40] However, 2014 marked a dramatic uptick in increasingly bold activity aimed at U.S. targets.

Significant developments in Russian cyberoperations in 2014 include:

The U.S. State Department hack: Russian hackers penetrated the U.S. State Department system in what was considered at the time to be the "worst ever" cyberintrusion against a federal agency.[41]

The White House hack: Russian hackers breached the unclassified White House computer networks. As with the hack of then-Clinton campaign Chairman John Podesta's emails in 2016, Russian hackers' intrusion on White House networks is believed to have begun with a phishing email launched from a State Department email account that the Russian hackers had taken over.[42]

Thanks in part to a Dutch intelligence agency that had infiltrated the hacking group, we now know that Cozy Bear, the Russian military intelligence unit that hacked the Democratic National Committee and Podesta, also perpetrated these attacks.[43] These hackers were not just ordinary Russians; they were an elite unit associated with the GRU.

Targeting infrastructure: Beginning in 2014, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security started warning utility companies about threats that Russian hackers pose to critical infrastructure.[44]

While Russia's cybercapabilities hardly began in 2014, it does appear that the cybertools and cyberweapons that would become central to the Russian government's interference in the 2016 election were being refined and sharpened then.

LOE 3: Courting of conservative institutions

Around the same time that the IRA was ramping up its efforts in the United States and Russian hackers were growing increasingly bold against American targets, there was what appears to have been a very deliberate and concerted outreach on behalf of the Kremlin to court and foster relationships with influential conservative political groups.

This strategy of building ties with Republican thought leaders and influencers may strike some as counterintuitive. However, it comports with Russian objectives and resources in three important ways. First, in seeking to temper the Republican Party's stance on Russia, accumulating goodwill and support from some of the Party's most influential voices would go a long way. Second, the Russian intelligence services are well-practiced in this tactic. For decades, the same intelligence services in the Soviet Union sought to influence groups on the left in NATO countries, so these methods would be familiar ground.[45] Third, this played perfectly into Putin's domestic goals as well as his foreign policy strategy. Domestically, Putin had begun to actively champion traditional values.[46] He had elevated the presence of the Russian Orthodox Church, seeking to position Russia as a stable counter to the West's increasingly progressive ideals. Famously, he passed a draconian anti-LGBT law in June 2013 that international organizations and human rights groups have criticized as discriminatory.[47] Thus, courting conservative American groups served a double purpose: It increased Russian influence in America while perpetuating Putin's new image as a defender of conservative ideals.

Activity that accelerated in the 2014-2015 time frame includes:

Deepening ties to the National Rifle Association (NRA): The most thoroughly explored of these relationships is that between the Kremlin and the NRA. In a preliminary report on their investigation between the Trump campaign and Russian operatives, Democrats on the Senate Judiciary Committee wrote that they had "obtained a number of documents that suggest the Kremlin used the

National Rifle Association as a means of accessing and assisting Mr. Trump and his campaign."[48] The FBI is also reportedly investigating whether Russia used the NRA to illegally funnel money into the United States to help then-candidate Trump win the election.[49] Furthermore, a Justice Department criminal complaint against Russian agent Maria Butina issued in July 2018 outlines her extensive effort to use or work with the NRA to expand her influence in American politics. Funded by a Kremlin-aligned oligarch, Butina reported back to a high-level government official and close associate of Putin. According to the affidavit, Butina specifically sought to "penetrate the U.S. national decision-making apparatus."[50] Butina revealed her strategy in a March 2015 email, writing that the Republican Party is "traditionally associated with negative and aggressive foreign policy, particularly with regards to Russia. However, now with the right to negotiate seems best to build konstruktivnyh [sic] relations."[51] The fact that she was already in the United States, collecting intelligence, and developing a strategy suggests that the operation began earlier than 2015.

Russia's outreach to the evangelical community: In this period, Putin began building and strengthening existing ties with leaders from another group that is highly influential in American conservative politics: the evangelical movement.[52]

The most notable example is a 45-minute meeting that took place in December 2015 between Putin and evangelical leader Franklin Graham, during which Graham reportedly secured Putin's support for a conference on the persecution of Christians.[53] According to *The Washington Post*, Putin went beyond what Graham was seeking and offered to organize the conference himself. Graham later called on his followers to support a 2017 meeting between Presidents Trump and Putin, accusing "the media and enemies of President Trump" of trying to "drive a wedge between Russia and the United States," and adding that "our country needs Russia as an ally."[54]

Other conservative Christian leaders and organizations expanded both direct and ideological ties to Russia during this period. According to *The Washington Post*, for example, Brian Brown, president of the National Organization for Marriage and a leading opponent of same-sex marriage, visited Moscow four times in four years between 2013 and 2017, where he met with lawmakers and testified before the Duma, the Russian Parliament.[55]

This is not to say that Graham or any other evangelical leaders necessarily did anything illicit in these meetings. It does, however, suggest that Russia was actively courting leading voices of this movement. Similar activity predates 2014, but it is evident that the cadence and level of engagement on the part of the Kremlin accelerated around 2014.

LOE 4: Fostering destabilizing political movements

A cornerstone of the Kremlin's strategy to undermine democratic processes in its near abroad has been to support destabilizing or fringe parties, movements, and causes—particularly those that weaken the trans-Atlantic alliance and the liberal world order more broadly.[56] This support has often relied on the tactics described earlier in this report. For example, Russian bots on social media supported the "leave" campaign during the Brexit referendum, and an investigation in the United Kingdom is looking into potential links to the Russia government; a Kremlin-backed bank provided financial support for the anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant National Front Party in France; and the Catalan independence movement received significant support from Russian trolls, bots, and state television.[57]

Russia has also supported fringe political movements in the United States. For example, Russia's online support for secessionist movements and the alt-right within the United States is well-documented.[58] However, both these movements have even deeper ties to Russia, and, again, 2014 was a key moment in their development.

Russia and Yes California: In 2014, Yes California—the secessionist organization behind the so-called Calexit vote in 2016—was founded in San Diego. It is unusual that Yes California President and Co-Founder Louis J. Marinelli—a New York native—does not have not have deep roots in California. Marinelli does, however, have considerable ties to Russia. The 32-year-old lived in Russia for several stretches following college until he moved to California and started the California secessionist organization in 2014.[59] In fact, the organization has been run out of Russia, specifically the city of Yekaterinburg on the edges of Siberia, where Marinelli lives with his wife.[60]

Marinelli has denied any connections to Russian officials and said that the group

receives no foreign funding.[61] However, the group has reportedly opened an embassy in Moscow—the only one of its kind—with the aid of a Kremlin-financed group.[62] Beyond the embassy, however, we know that Russian bots, trolls, and state television helped promote the movement that Marinelli founded. We know that Marinelli has deep ties to Russia. We know that the Kremlin has supported similar secessionist efforts throughout Europe and the Middle East. It is therefore entirely plausible that the group received additional support, encouragement, or manipulation from Russian sources—even if Marinelli and the rest of the organization were unaware of the origin of the support. And, once again, the start date for this alleged activity was 2014.

Russia and the alt-right: While California's secession may seem like a peripheral movement with a marginal impact on American political life, few movements have had a more toxic effect on American political discourse than the recent rise of the white nationalists of the alt-right. Again, the movement has deep ties with Russia and the 2014-2015 time frame is key.

Putin has promoted an image of himself as the leader of a global white ethnonationalist movement since at least 2012. This coincides with his campaign for his third term as president, when he wanted to project an image of Russia not only as a military power, but also a civilizational model and defender of traditional values that was deserving of international respect.[63]

According to a profile in *The Atlantic* of Andrew Anglin—the founder of The Daily Stormer who espouses views sympathetic to the Kremlin—spent 2014 and 2015 in Europe and Russia.[64] The details of what he was doing in Russia are not clear, but it was during this time period that Anglin connected with The Daily Stormer's future Chief Technology Officer Andrew Auernheimer.[65] As *The Atlantic's* Luke O'Brien describes their meeting:

> **In 2014, Anglin was living in Europe when he found a partner in Andrew Auernheimer, a.k.a. "weev," a neo-Nazi hacker and troll. Auernheimer grew up in the Ozarks and went to federal prison in 2013 on identity-theft and hacking charges. After his conviction was vacated on appeal a year later, he moved abroad. He now lives in Transnistria, a small, Russia-backed breakaway region on Moldova's eastern border.**[66]

It was after these two teamed up—the tech-savvy hacker and the prolific online troll—that The Daily Stormer took off. Anglin keeps his whereabouts secret. However, official records show that he was in Russia in 2016, casting his absentee ballot in the election from Krasnodar, a Russian city on the Black Sea, according to the records in Franklin County, Ohio.[67] Anglin has denied taking any support or direction from the Russian government. Whether he is aware of it or not, however, the content from his website has been promoted by bots and individuals operating under false identities that shut down between midnight and 6:00 a.m. local time in Moscow and St. Petersburg.[68]

The unusual ties between America's far-right and Russia, especially during the 2014-2015 time period, go deeper than just The Daily Stormer. In 2014, the prominent alt-right activist Matthew Heimbach, who has described Russia as the "leader of the free world right now" and a "model for civilization," was baptized in the Russian Orthodox Church.[69] And in 2015, St. Petersburg hosted the International Russian Conservative Forum, where American white nationalists joined 30 representatives from groups including Greece's Golden Dawn, the National Democratic Party of Germany, Italy's Forza Nuova, the Russian Imperial Movement, as well as the former head of the British National Party, Nick Griffin.[70]

It is unclear what—if any—direct connection the Russian government and intelligence services may have to these organizations. There is no publicly available record of financial support, though The Daily Stormer's primary source of funding comes from anonymous bitcoin donations, which makes it difficult to know the ultimate source.[71] As with Yes California, however, there are a series of mysterious connections that lead back to Russia. Whether or not the Americans involved were aware, it is very likely they could have been receiving support or encouragement from Russian intelligence services as part of an effort to promote discord, sow divide, and poison the political conversation in the United States.[72] In fact, it would be almost unthinkable that leaders of American separatist movements and neo-Nazi organizations would be operating out of Russia without, at a minimum, the government of Russia's knowledge and consent.

LOE 5: Voter targeting

Perhaps the least-understood LOE is Russia's attempt to directly sway voters for an electoral impact. However, revelations, especially from Cambridge Analytica whistleblower Christopher Wylie, have provided some new insight into how Russia may have engaged directly in efforts to influence voters.[73] Yet again, a series of suspicious events took place in 2014 that appear to mark the beginning of a concerted effort.

Lukoil executives meet with Cambridge Analytica: In 2014 and early 2015, Cambridge Analytica met at least three times with Kremlin-connected executives from the Russian oil giant Lukoil, which the United States sanctioned in 2014 in response to Russian acts of aggression in Ukraine.[74] The Lukoil executives reportedly "showed interest" not in Cambridge Analytica and its parent company SCL Group's consumer-focused work, but in its use of data to target messages to American voters. Adding to the suspicion, Cambridge Analytica's CEO Alexander Nix later lied to the U.K. parliament's investigative committee, saying he had no contacts with Russian entities.[75]

To understand why a Russian petroleum and natural gas giant would be interested in American voter behavior, it is helpful to look more closely at Lukoil's history of interfering in other countries' politics to the benefit of the Kremlin. For example, Czech President Milos Zeman has been subject to accusations that Lukoil helped finance his presidential campaign.[76] While the exact details of that financial relationship have not come to light, there are well-documented ties between Lukoil and Prague Castle.[77] The former head of a Lukoil subsidiary is one of Zeman's top advisers and Party vice chairman and has been a driving force behind the country's pro-Russian tilt. The company even paid a $1.4 million fine he faced, allowing him to keep his influential job and his office next to the president's.[78] This demonstrates the extent to which Lukoil was willing to intervene in the legal and political machinations of countries to serve the Kremlin's foreign policy objectives. This context helps explain why Lukoil might have been interested in Cambridge Analytica's information on American voters, though we ultimately do not yet know the exact purpose behind the meeting.

Cambridge Analytica obtains Facebook data: In June 2014, Cambridge Analytica first enlisted the Russian-American academic Aleksandr Kogan to mine private Facebook user data. Kogan received grants from the Russian government to research "stress, health and psychological wellbeing in social networks."[79]

Steve Bannon begins message testing Russia as an issue: In 2014, Steve Bannon, then a vice president at Cambridge Analytica, had the firm testing messages around Putin and Russian expansion, according to Wylie. This past April, Wylie told members of the U.S. House Judiciary and Oversight committees that, under Bannon's instruction, the firm discussed Putin with focus groups, tested images of the Russian president, and asked questions about Russian expansion in Eastern Europe. Wylie added that "it was the only foreign issue, or foreign leader, I should say, being tested at the time I was there."[80]

In other words, within a short period of time, Kremlin-linked businessmen approached a data analytics firm about targeting American voters. That same firm, which would later go on to serve as the digital arm of the Trump campaign, then acquired data on American voters through a Russian contact. The firm's vice president, who would later become the CEO of the Trump campaign and chief strategist in the White House, began exploring how pro-Russian messages would appeal to an American public. The depth of the ties and the details of the relationship between Russia and Cambridge Analytica remain unknown to the public, but it does appear that 2014 marked a significant starting point in that relationship.

Policy implications

It is clear that the full-fledged, coordinated attack against the United States' political system began in 2014 and in response to a series of events that culminated in the international reaction to the Ukraine crisis. Considering this analysis, the U.S. government should pursue a two-pronged strategy consisting of an offense that places more pressure on the Kremlin to discontinue its malign behavior and a defense that better protects from asymmetric responses coming out of Moscow.

Offense: Pressure the Kremlin through additional sanctions

Perhaps the most important policy lesson from this analysis is that the package of diplomatic and economic measures put into place following the invasion of Crimea that intended to isolate Putin by targeting his base of support was ultimately so forceful that that Putin was willing to undertake this

extraordinarily ambitious and risky campaign to strike back.

The 2014 sanctions were designed to send a message to Russia that there is a cost for violating another country's sovereignty and to push Russia toward a resolution that would respect Ukraine's territorial integrity under international law. They were also designed to minimize the negative economic blowback on the still-recovering economies in Europe and the United States. The series of events outlined above suggests that U.S. policy did in fact influence Putin's behavior, just not as intended. Ultimately, sanctions against Russia had minimal impact on the United States and Europe, but they had a hugely significant impact on the Russian economy and the Kremlin elite—so much so that Putin felt the need to find a way to hit back. The United States and Europe, however, misread how Russia would respond.

The lesson from this is that the United States and Europe have huge potential leverage over Russia through sanctions, but that the United States and Europe must also expect a response and should be intensely focused on countering asymmetric Russian measures.

Therefore, the strategic approach for the 2017 Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) is sound. The legislation targets the oligarchs and security officials surrounding Putin to send a clear message that echoes the Magnitsky Act: Putin cannot protect you, or your money.[81] The Trump administration, however, has repeatedly delayed and bungled CAATSA's implementation.[82] Most recently, an executive order mandating a review by the director of national intelligence following the election appears to have been an effort to undermine pending legislation in Congress rather than seriously address the problem.[83]

Congress and the Trump administration should immediately take the following steps:

Pass and sign the Defending American Security from Kremlin Aggression Act of 2018

A bipartisan group led by Sens. Lindsay Graham (R-SC) and Robert Menendez (D-NJ) has introduced new legislation to increase economic, political, and diplomatic pressure on Russia in response to its continued interference in U.S. elections as well as other activities, including aggression in Crimea and influence in Syria.[84] This legislation is a necessary follow-up to CAATSA. In addition to reconfirming America's support for NATO, the legislation expands sanctions on new Russian sovereign debt; against investment in state-owned energy projects; and on targeted political figures, oligarchs, and family members who facilitate illicit and corrupt activities on behalf of Putin. Because this bill is meant to respond to Russia's continued interference ahead of the 2018 midterm elections, Congress should immediately move forward with the legislation.

Reinstate the U.S. State Department's office of sanctions coordination

The office, which was created under the Obama administration to coordinate an increasingly complicated network of financial and geoeconomic tools, was shuttered in 2017 by the Trump administration. The responsibilities of the office, which were previously handled by a senior career ambassador and a staff of at least five, were transferred to a single mid-level staffer in the office of policy planning. Given the expansion of sanctions, their increasing complexity, and the Trump administration's failure to adequately implement CAATSA, the sanctions coordination office at the State Department should immediately be reinstated and empowered to coordinate these mechanisms across the government.[85]

Defense: Increase protections against asymmetric attacks

The Kremlin has demonstrated that it will seek to hit back in response to sanctions. Therefore, the United States and Europe need to work energetically to better defend themselves and to limit potential avenues of attack.

The Kremlin's most effective response has been to attack U.S. and European democracies by exploiting the openness of liberal societies. It is clear from Putin's assault on the United States that what he fears most is the success of democratic systems and the strength of the Euro-Atlantic institutions.[86] It was his fear that Ukraine would seek a free, open, and democratic future tied to the European Union that eventually was the last straw for him, triggering the 2016 assault. As such, America needs to prioritize protecting democracy and the rule of law as the primary weapon in this fight. With this in mind, Congress and the Trump administration should take the following steps:

Enhance government coordination to counter foreign interference

As outlined above, foreign interference in our democracy is an issue that cuts across issue verticals and agency responsibilities. To improve its coordination among the multiple agencies responding to and preventing foreign influence, the U.S. government should either stand up a high-level dedicated interagency task force or create a new center to coordinate government efforts that is modeled after the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC).[87] This group should bring together law enforcement, intelligence, and subject-matter experts to conduct threat analysis, facilitate information sharing, and conduct strategic operation planning across the government.

Expand transparency in the U.S. political and economic system

The Russian political assault on the United States has affected nearly every major sector of influence in America: social media; nonprofit organizations; lobbying firms; television and radio; religious leaders; grassroots activists; and major corporations. This reach reveals just how opaque the American political and economic systems are. Current money laundering regulations are clearly inadequate and underenforced, as are regulations meant to provide transparency for foreign political influence, such as the Foreign Agent's Registration Act (FARA), which was originally written to curb the influence of Nazi propaganda in the 1930s.[88] The proliferation of cryptocurrency only makes secret donations more difficult to trace. Current regulations need to be updated to address modern threats.

Expand U.S. counterintelligence efforts against Russia and protect the Mueller investigation

While U.S. intelligence agencies turned their focus from Russia to countering terrorism—especially after 9/11—Russia maintained its intelligence focus on the United States. Given Russia's hostile intentions, the United States must redouble its efforts to counter Russian espionage efforts.

Special counsel Mueller's investigation into Russia's attack on the United States and its American co-conspirators is critical to this effort. The investigation is working at a breakneck speed and has already made considerable progress in uncovering the details behind the attack. The special counsel has produced indictments against 35 entities, including 29 Russian entities; six guilty pleas; and a conviction against former Trump campaign Chairman Paul Manafort.[89]

Yet, President Trump and his supporters in Congress have launched an unprecedented campaign of harassment and obstruction toward the special counsel.[90] The president reportedly even tried to fire Mueller on multiple occasions until he was stopped by his staff.[91] This investigation must be allowed to continue without interference or obstruction. There is currently legislation before the Senate that would grant Mueller, or any future special counsel, a judicial review if he were fired.[92] It would also require the attorney general to provide a report to Congress if a special counsel is appointed or removed as well as detailed information if the scope of an investigation is changed. The bill essentially creates a route, in the event that a special counsel is fired, for the decision to be immediately challenged in court. The bill has passed through the Senate Judiciary Committee with bipartisan support but has stalled due to Majority Leader Mitch McConnell's (R-KY) refusal to bring it to the floor on the grounds that it is unnecessary.[93] Protecting the Mueller investigation and bringing those responsible for the attack on the U.S. election to justice would be a victory for the rule of law and would send an important message to the world that, unlike Putin's system of cronyism and kleptocracy, all are equal in the eyes of the law in the United States.

Ensure social media companies provide greater transparency and data protection

American social media companies have built incredibly innovative tools that help drive our economy. However, these tools are also being used as a weapon against American democracy; Russian bots and trolls are actively exploiting their access to U.S. social media to advance disinformation operations against the American public. Congress should require social media companies to ensure their platforms are transparent by immediately moving to pass the Honest Ads Act, which would require online political advertising on social media to have a similar level of transparency as ads broadcast by television and radio stations.[94] Tech companies must also do more to protect users' data and information. That data can be incredibly sensitive and used to manipulate audiences, influence events, shape public opinion, and potentially blackmail and recruit potential foreign agents.[95] Congress should work with these industries to establish regulations and guidelines that ensure consumer privacy and protection.

Improve the readiness of front-line NATO and European forces

While it is unlikely that Putin will undertake a direct military response in reaction to additional sanctions, he is known to seize tactical opportunities—often through the use of military force. The NATO alliance as well as non-NATO European states should be on-guard and seek to improve readiness to harden soft points in their defenses and, therefore, close off any significant military openings for the Kremlin.[96]

Conclusion

The unprecedented Russian assault on the United States has captured America's and the world's attention, and the public continues to learn new details about what happened each and every day. It is now clear that this attack on our democracy was more robust and coordinated than had been previously understood, consisting of five concurrent LOEs that were launched together in 2014 as an answer to the U.S.-led international response to the Ukraine crisis. These LOEs were sophisticated and mutually reinforcing, combining disinformation, cyberintrusion, support for destabilizing groups, political influence, and direct targeting of voters. And they had the combined goal of sowing chaos, undermining the reputation of democracy, and even shifting American policy toward Russia.

No matter how sophisticated and effective this attack may have been, it was done from a position of weakness on Russia's part; the attack was asymmetric because Russia lacks the means to respond to the United States as a peer. This is a difficult but not insurmountable problem. The Trump administration, however, has failed to either demonstrate that there is a cost to interfering in America's democracy or protect the country from further Russian aggression. Congress needs to step up with a dual-pronged approach that both applies pressure on Russia via additional sanctions and improves the United States' defensive capabilities against further Russian interference.

About the author

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